

Chore Wars

Chore Wars is an alternate reality game (ARG), a game you play in your real life (and not a virtual environment) in order to enjoy it more. Chore Wars is essentially a simplified version of *World of Warcraft*, with one notable exception: all of the online quests correspond with real-world cleaning tasks, and instead of playing with strangers or faraway friends online, you play the game with your roommates, family, or officemates. Kevan Davis, a British experiential game developer who created Chore Wars in 2007, describes it as a “chore management system.”¹ It’s meant to help you track how much housework people are doing—and to inspire everyone to do more housework, more cheerfully, than they would otherwise.

To play Chore Wars, you first have to recruit a “party of adventurers” from your real-life household or office. That means getting your roommates, family members, or coworkers to sign up online, where together you’ll name your kingdom and create avatars to represent everyone in the game.

Anyone who creates an avatar is eligible to undertake any of the custom “adventures” that you create in the game’s database—in my household, these include emptying the dishwasher and brewing the first pot of coffee. And because it’s a role-playing game, you’re encouraged to write up the chores with a fantastical spin. In the Land of the 41st-Floor Ninjas, for example, brushing out our Shetland sheepdog is “Saving the dog-damsel in distress from clumps and shedding,” and doing the laundry is “Conjuring clean clothes.”

Whenever you complete one of these chores, you log in to the game to report your success. Every chore grants you a customized amount of experience points, virtual gold, treasure, avatar power-ups, or points that increase your virtual skills and abilities: plus ten dexterity points for dusting without knocking anything off the shelves, for example, or plus five stamina points for taking out all three kinds of recycling. And because you get to craft the adventures from scratch yourself, you can customize the in-game rewards to make the least popular chores more attractive—hence, the battle in my apartment to clean the bathroom first. It’s worth a whopping one hundred XP.

The more chores you finish, the more experience points and virtual gold you earn, and the faster you level up your online avatar’s powers. But Chore Wars isn’t just about tracking your avatar development; it’s also about earning real rewards. The game’s instructions encourage households to invent creative ways to redeem the virtual gold in real life. You could exchange the gold for allowances if you’re playing with your kids, or for rounds of drinks for roommates, or coffee runs for workmates, for example. My husband and I share a single car, so we use our gold pieces to bid on what music to play in the car whenever we’re driving somewhere together.

But even more satisfying than all of my avatar powers, accumulated gold, and music privileges is the fact that after nine months of playing Chore Wars together, my husband’s avatar has earned more overall experience points than I have. And avatar stats don’t lie: for nearly a year now, Kiyash has definitely put in more effort cleaning the apartment than I have.

Clearly, this is a game that you win even if you lose. Kiyash has the satisfaction of being the best ninja on the forty-first floor, and I have the pleasure of doing fewer chores than my husband—at least until my competitive spirit kicks back in. Not to mention, it’s more enjoyable to be partners in crime when it comes to housework, instead of nagging each other about chores. And, of course, as an added bonus, our place is cleaner than it ever has been before. Chore Wars has transformed something we both normally hate doing into something that feels creative and fun. The game has changed our reality of having to do housework, and for the better.

We’re not alone. Chore Wars is one of the best reviewed and most beloved, if little known, secrets on the Internet.

A mom in Texas describes a typical Chore Wars experience: “We have three children, ages nine, eight, and seven. I sat down with the kids, showed them their characters and the adventures, and they literally jumped up and ran off to complete their chosen tasks. I’ve never seen my eight-year-old son make his bed! And I almost fainted when my husband cleaned out the toaster oven.”

The experience apparently works as well for twentysomethings as it does for kids. As another player reports: “I live in a house in London with one other girl and six guys. A lot of the time I’m the only one tidying up, which was

driving me slowly insane. I set up an account for us last night, and set some ‘adventures,’ and when I got up this morning *everyone in the house was cleaning*. I honestly could not believe what I was seeing. All we had to do is make it a competition! Now the guys are obsessed with beating each other!”²

How, exactly, does Chore Wars do it?

We typically think of chores as things we have to do. Either someone is nagging us to do them or we do them out of absolute necessity. That’s why they’re called chores: by definition, unpleasant tasks. The brilliant masterstroke of Chore Wars is that it convinces us that we *want* to do these tasks.

More important, however, is the introduction of *meaningful choice* into the housework equation. When you set up your party, your first task is to create a large pool of adventures to choose from. No player is assigned a particular adventure. Instead, everyone gets to pick their own. There are no *necessary* chores. You are volunteering for every adventure you take. And this sense of voluntary participation in housework is strengthened by the fact that you’re encouraged to apply strategy as you choose your own housework adventures. Should you go for lots of chores that are fast and easy to complete, and try to rack up as many XP as possible that way? Or should you go for the harder, bigger chores, blocking other players from getting all that gold?

Of course, there are no good unnecessary obstacles without arbitrary restrictions. And for advanced Chore Wars players, that’s where the real fun comes in. You can make it harder to earn XP and gold by adding new rules to any adventure. For example, you can set target time limits: double XP if you can put away your laundry in under five minutes. Or you can add a stealth requirement: you must empty the trash without anyone seeing you. Or you can simply tack on absurd restrictions: this chore must be done while singing, loudly, for example, or while walking backward.

It sounds ridiculous—why would making a chore harder make it more fun? But like any good game, the more interesting the restrictions, the more we enjoy playing. The Chore Wars management system makes it easy for players to dream up and try out new ways of doing the most ordinary things. Chores are, again by definition, routine—but they don’t have to be. Doing them in a game format makes it possible to experience *fiero* doing something as mun-

dane as cleaning up a mess, simply by making it more challenging, or by requiring us to be more creative about how we do it.

In real life, if you do your chores, there are visible results—a sparkling kitchen, or an organized garage. That’s one kind of feedback, and it can certainly be satisfying. But Chore Wars smartly augments this small, everyday satisfaction with a more intense kind of feedback: avatar improvements. As online role-playing gamers everywhere know, leveling up is one of the most satisfying kinds of feedback ever designed. Watching your avatar profile get more powerful and skillful with each chore makes the work feel personally satisfying in a way that a cleaner room just doesn’t. You are not just doing all this work for someone else. You are developing your own strengths as you play.

Best of all, you are getting better and better all the time. Even as the laundry gets dirty again or the dust starts to sneak back in, your avatar is still getting stronger, smarter, swifter. In this way, Chore Wars brilliantly reverses the most demoralizing aspects of regular housework. The results of a chore well done may start to fade almost immediately, but no one can take away the XP you have earned.

Individual success is always more rewarding when it happens in a multiplayer context, and this is part of Chore Wars’ successful design as well. The game connects all of my individual activities to a larger social experience: I’m never just doing “my” chores; I’m playing with and competing against others. I can see how I measure up to others and compare avatar strengths to learn more about what makes me unique. Meanwhile, as I’m working, I’m thinking about the positive social feedback I’ll get in the comments on my adventure, whether it’s friendly taunts from a rival or OMCs of amazement for getting such a herculean task done.

Chore Wars isn’t the kind of game you’d want to play forever; like all good games, their destiny is to become boring eventually, the better you get at them. But even if household interest in the game dies down after a few weeks or months, a major feat has been accomplished: players have had a rather memorable, positive experience of doing chores together. And that should change the way they think about and approach chores for some time.

So that’s how Chore Wars achieves the seemingly impossible. It turns

routine housework into a collective adventure, by adding unnecessary obstacles and implementing more motivating feedback systems. And it's the perfect example of our next reality fix:

FIX #7: WHOLEHEARTED PARTICIPATION

Compared with games, reality is hard to get into. Games motivate us to participate more fully in whatever we're doing.

To participate wholeheartedly in something means to be *self-motivated* and *self-directed*, *intensely interested* and *genuinely enthusiastic*.

If we're forced to do something, or if we do it halfheartedly, we're not really participating.

If we don't care how it all turns out, we're not really participating.

If we're passively waiting it out, we're not really participating.

And the less we fully participate in our everyday lives, the fewer opportunities we have to be happy. It's that plain and simple. The emotional and social rewards we really crave require active, enthusiastic, self-motivated participation. And helping players participate more fully in the moment, instead of trying to escape it or just get through it, is *the* signature hallmark of alternate reality projects—the focus of this and the following three chapters of this book. If “alternate reality” is an unfamiliar term for you, then you're not alone. Alternate reality development is still a highly experimental field. The term “alternate reality game” has been in use as a technical industry term since 2002, but there are still plenty of gamers and game designers who know little about it, let alone people outside of the gaming world.

As game developers are increasingly starting to push the limits of how

much a game can affect our real lives, the concept of alternate reality is becoming more and more central to discussions about the future of games. It's helping to promote the idea that game technologies can be used to organize real-world activity. Most importantly, it's provoking innovative ideas about how to blend together what we love most about games and what we want most from our real lives.

On a recent Saturday morning, I found myself on Twitter, trading possible definitions for “alternate reality game” back and forth with about fifty other alternate reality gamers and developers. We were trying to work out a short definition that would really capture the spirit of ARG design, if not necessarily describe all the possible technological and formal components.

Collectively, we cobbled together a description of ARGs that seems to capture their spirit more effectively than any other definition I've seen: alternate realities are the *antiscapist* game.

ARGs are designed to make it easier to generate the four intrinsic rewards we crave—more satisfying work, better hope of success, stronger social connectivity, and more meaning—whenever we can't or don't want to be in a virtual environment. They're not meant to diminish the real rewards we get from playing traditional computer and video games. But they do make a strong argument that these rewards should be easier to get in real life.

In other words, ARGs are games you play to get more out of your real life, as opposed to games you play to escape it. ARG developers want us to participate as fully in our everyday lives as we do in our game lives.

Apart from this common mission, great alternate reality games can differ tremendously from one to another, in terms of style, scale, scope, and budget. Some ARGs, like *Chore Wars*, have relatively humble ambitions. They pick one very specific area of our personal lives and try to improve it. Others have quite audacious goals, involving entire communities or society at large: for example, to reinvent public education as we know it, to help players discover their true purpose in life, or even to improve our experience of death and dying.

Of course, not all ARGs are designed explicitly to improve our lives. Historically, in fact, most ARGs, like most computer and videogames, have been

designed simply to be fun and emotionally satisfying. But my research shows that because ARGs are played in real-world contexts, instead of in virtual spaces, they almost always have at least the *side effect* of improving our real lives.³ And so while others might distinguish between “serious” ARGs and “entertainment” ARGs, I prefer to look at *all* ARGs as having the potential to improve our quality of life. Indeed, a significantly higher percent of newer ARGs (created since 2007, compared with early ARGs created 2001–2006) are designed with explicit quality of life or world-changing goals. You’ll read about these “positive impact” ARGs in the chapters ahead.

Some ARGs are invented and playtested on a shoestring budget, whether by artists, researchers, indie game developers, or nonprofit organizations. They’re often developed for relatively small groups: a few hundred or a few thousand players. Others are backed by multimillion-dollar investments, receive funding from major foundations, or are sponsored by Fortune 500 companies. These bigger games can attract tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even, in a few extremely successful cases, millions of players.⁴

Still, for the most part, alternate reality games today are small-scale probes of the future. They’re a showcase for new possibilities. No single ARG is changing the world yet. But taken together, they’re proving one at a time the myriad and important ways we could make our real lives better by playing more games.

So let’s look at a few groundbreaking alternate reality projects. As we do, you’ll notice that there are two key qualities that every good ARG shares.

First and foremost, like any good game, an ARG must always be *optional*. You can bet that if you *required* someone to play Chore Wars, it would lose a large part of its appeal and effectiveness. An alternate reality game has to remain a true “alternate” for it to work.

It’s not enough, however, just to make something optional. Once the activity is under way, a good ARG, like any good game, also needs compelling goals, interesting obstacles, and well-designed feedback systems. These three elements encourage fuller participation by tapping into our natural desires to master challenges, to be creative, to push the limits of our abilities. And that’s where **optimal experience design** comes in. Without a doubt, some alternate

realities are more fun and engaging than others, just as some traditional games are better than others. The best ARGs are the ones that, like the best traditional computer and video games, help us create more satisfying work for ourselves, cultivate better hopes of success, strengthen our social bonds and activate our social networks, and give us the chance to contribute to something bigger than ourselves.

One ARG that achieves all of these goals is *Quest to Learn*—a bold new design for public schools that shows us how education can be transformed to engage students as wholeheartedly as their favorite video games.

Quest to Learn—And Why Our Schools Should Work More Like a Game

Today’s “born-digital” kids—the first generation to grow up with the Internet, born 1990 and later—crave gameplay in a way that older generations don’t.

Most of them have had easy access to sophisticated games and virtual worlds their entire lives, and so they take high-intensity engagement and active participation for granted. They know what extreme, positive activation feels like, and when they’re not feeling it, they’re bored and frustrated.⁵ They have good reason to feel that way: it’s a lot harder to function in low-motivation, low-feedback, and low-challenge environments when you’ve grown up playing sophisticated games. And that’s why today’s born-digital kids are suffering more in traditional classrooms than any previous generation. School today for the most part is just one long series of *necessary* obstacles that produce negative stress. The work is mandatory and standardized, and failure goes on your permanent record. As a result, there’s a growing disconnect between virtual environments and the classroom.

Marc Prensky, author of *Teaching Digital Natives*, describes the current educational crisis:

“Engage me or enrage me,” today’s students demand. And believe me, they’re enraged. All the students we teach have something in